

The background is a deep red color with a cracked, textured appearance, resembling dried mud or stone. The text is white and stands out against this background. The word 'NEVER' is rendered in a 3D, blocky font that appears to be breaking apart, with white debris and dust trailing off to the right side of the letters.

KEN
FOLLETT
NEVER

#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF
THE EVENING AND THE MORNING

A NOVEL

ALSO BY KEN FOLLETT

The Modigliani Scandal

Paper Money

Eye of the Needle

Triple

The Key to Rebecca

The Man from St. Petersburg

On Wings of Eagles

Lie Down with Lions

The Pillars of the Earth

Night over Water

A Dangerous Fortune

A Place Called Freedom

The Third Twin

The Hammer of Eden

Code to Zero

Jackdaws

Hornet Flight

Whiteout

World Without End

Fall of Giants

Winter of the World

Edge of Eternity

A Column of Fire

Notre-Dame

The Evening and the Morning

NEVER

KEN
FOLLETT



VIKING

VIKING

An imprint of Penguin Random House LLC
penguinrandomhouse.com

Copyright © 2021 by Ken Follett

Penguin supports copyright. Copyright fuels creativity, encourages diverse voices, promotes free speech, and creates a vibrant culture. Thank you for buying an authorized edition of this book and for complying with copyright laws by not reproducing, scanning, or distributing any part of it in any form without permission. You are supporting writers and allowing Penguin to continue to publish books for every reader.

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Names: Follett, Ken, author.

Title: Never / Ken Follett.

Description: First edition. | New York: Viking, [2021]

Identifiers: LCCN 2021009867 (print) | LCCN 2021009868 (ebook) | ISBN 9780593300015 (hardcover) | ISBN 9780593300022 (ebook)

Subjects: GSAFD: Suspense fiction.

Classification: LCC PR6056.O45 N48 2021 (print) | LCC PR6056.O45 (ebook) | DDC 823/.914—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2021009867>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2021009868>

Cover design: Tal Goretsky

Cover images: (rocks) kkong / Alamy Stock Photo; (background) Itsaret Sutthisiri / Shutterstock

Book design by Daniel Lagin, adapted for ebook by Cora Wigen

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, businesses, companies, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

pid_prh_5.8.0_8903771_c0_r0

CONTENTS

[Cover](#)

[Also by Ken Follett](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Author's Note](#)

[Epigraph](#)

[Munchkin Country](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Defcon 5](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Defcon 4](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Defcon 3](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Chapter 35](#)

[Chapter 36](#)

[Defcon 2](#)

[Chapter 37](#)

[Chapter 38](#)

[Chapter 39](#)

[Defcon 1](#)

[Chapter 40](#)

[Chapter 41](#)

Chapter 42

Acknowledgments

About the Author

When I was doing the research for *Fall of Giants* I was shocked to realize that the First World War was a war that *nobody wanted*. No European leader on either side intended it to happen. But the emperors and prime ministers, one by one, made decisions—logical, moderate decisions—each of which took us a small step closer to the most terrible conflict the world had ever known. I came to believe that it was all a tragic accident.

And I wondered: could that happen again?

Two tigers cannot share the same mountain.

Chinese proverb

MUNCHKIN COUNTRY

PROLOGUE

For many years James Madison held the title of the shortest-ever United States president, at five feet four inches. Then President Green broke his record. Pauline Green was four feet eleven inches. She liked to point out that Madison had defeated DeWitt Clinton, who was six feet three.

She had twice postponed her visit to Munchkin Country. It had been scheduled once every year she had been in office, but there was always something more important to do. This time she felt she had to go. It was a mild September morning in the third year of her presidency.

This exercise was a Rehearsal of Concept Drill, used to familiarize senior government figures with what they had to do in an emergency. Pretending that the United States was under attack, she walked rapidly out of the Oval Office to the South Lawn of the White House.

Hurrying behind her was a handful of key people who were rarely far from her side: her national security advisor, her senior secretary, two Secret Service bodyguards, and a young army captain carrying a leather-covered briefcase called the atomic football, which contained everything she needed to start a nuclear war.

Her helicopter was part of a fleet, and whichever one she was aboard was called Marine One. As always, a marine in blue dress uniform stood at attention as the president approached and ran lightly up the steps.

The first time Pauline had flown in a helicopter, something like twenty-five years ago, it had been an uncomfortable experience, she recalled, with hard metal seats in a cramped interior, and so noisy it was impossible to talk. This was different. The inside of the aircraft was like a private jet, with

comfortable seats upholstered in pale tan leather, air-conditioning, and a small bathroom.

The national security advisor, Gus Blake, sat next to her. A retired general, he was a big man, African American, with short gray hair. He exuded an air of reassuring strength. At fifty-five he was five years older than Pauline. He had been a key member of her team in the presidential election campaign, and now he was her closest colleague.

“Thank you for doing this,” he said as they took off. “I know you didn’t want to.”

He was right. She resented the distraction and felt impatient to get it over with. “One of those chores that just has to be done,” she said.

It was a short journey. As the helicopter descended she checked her appearance in a hand mirror. Her short blond bob was tidy, her makeup light. She had nice hazel eyes that showed the compassion she often felt, although her lips could set in a straight line that made her look remorselessly determined. She closed the mirror with a snap.

They landed at a warehouse complex in a suburb in Maryland. Its official name was U.S. Government Archive Overflow Storage Facility No. 2, but those few people who knew its real function called it Munchkin Country, after the place where Dorothy went during the tornado in *The Wizard of Oz*.

Munchkin Country was a secret. Everyone knew about the Raven Rock Complex in Colorado, the underground nuclear bunker where military leaders planned to shelter during a nuclear war. That was a real facility that would be important, but it was not where the president would go. A lot of people also knew that underneath the East Wing of the White House was the Presidential Emergency Operations Center, used in crises such as 9/11. However, that was not designed for long-term post-apocalypse use.

Munchkin Country would keep a hundred people alive for a year.

President Green was met by a General Whitfield. In his late fifties, he was round faced and plump, with an amiable manner and a marked lack of military aggression. Pauline felt quite sure he was not in the least interested in killing enemies—which was, after all, what soldiers were for. His lack of bellicosity would be why he had ended up in this job.

It was a genuine storage facility, and signs directed deliveries to a loading dock. Whitfield led the party through a small side door, and that was where the atmosphere changed.

They were confronted by a massive double door that would have looked appropriate at the entrance to a maximum-security prison.

The room it led to felt suffocating. It had a low ceiling, and its walls seemed nearer, as if they were several feet thick. The air had a bottled taste.

“This blast-proof room exists mainly to protect the elevators,” Whitfield said.

As they entered the elevator, Pauline quickly lost the impatient sense that she was engaged in an exercise that was barely necessary. This began to feel portentous.

Whitfield said: “With your permission, Madam President, we’ll go all the way down and work back up.”

“That will be fine, thank you, General.”

As the elevator descended he said proudly: “Ma’am, this facility offers you one hundred percent protection if the United States should suffer any of the following: a pandemic or plague; a natural disaster such as a large meteorite hitting the Earth; riot and major civil disorder; a successful invasion by conventional military forces; cyberattack; or nuclear war.”

If this list of potential catastrophes was meant to reassure Pauline, it failed. It reminded her that the end of civilization was possible and she might have to shelter in this hole in the ground so that she could try to save a remnant of the human race.

She thought she might prefer to die on the surface.

The elevator was falling fast and seemed to go a long way down before slowing. When at last it stopped, Whitfield said: “In case of elevator trouble, there is a staircase.”

It was a witticism, and the younger members of the party laughed, thinking about how many steps there might be, but Pauline remembered how long it had taken people to descend the stairs in the burning World Trade Center, and she did not crack a smile. Nor did Gus, she noticed.

The walls were painted restful green, soothing creamy white, and relaxing pale pink, but it was still an underground bunker. The creepy feeling remained with her as she was shown the Presidential Suite, the barracks with lines of cots, the hospital, gym, cafeteria, and supermarket.

The Situation Room was a replica of the one in the basement of the White House, with a long table down the center and chairs at the sides for aides. There were large screens on the walls. “We can provide all the visual data you get at the White House, and just as fast,” Whitfield said. “We can look at any city in the world by hacking into traffic cameras and security surveillance. We get military radar in real time. Satellite photos take a couple of hours to reach the Earth, as you know, but we get them at the same time as the Pentagon. We can pick up any television station, which can be useful on those rare occasions when CNN or Al Jazeera get a story before the security services. And we will have a team of linguists to provide instant subtitles for news programs in foreign languages.”

The facilities floor had a power plant with a diesel fuel reservoir the size of a lake, a heating and cooling system, and a five-million-gallon water tank fed by an underground spring. Pauline was not particularly claustrophobic, but she felt stifled by the idea of being stuck in here while the world outside was devastated. She became conscious of her own breathing.

As if reading her mind, Whitfield said: “Our air supply comes in from outside through a set of blast filters that, as well as resisting explosion damage, will capture airborne contaminants, whether chemical, biological, or radioactive.”

Fine, Pauline thought, but what about the millions of people on the surface who would have no protection?

At the end of the tour Whitfield said: “Madam President, your office indicated that you would not wish to have lunch before leaving, but we have prepared something in case you should change your mind.”

This always happened. Everyone liked the idea of an hour or so of informal conversation with the president. She felt a pang of sympathy for Whitfield, stuck underground in this important but unseen post, but she had to repress this urge as always and stick to her timetable.

Pauline rarely wasted time eating with people other than her family. She held meetings at which information was exchanged and decisions were made, then she moved on to the next meeting. She had slashed the number of formal banquets the president attended. "I'm the leader of the free world," she had said. "Why would I spend three hours talking to the king of Belgium?"

Now she said: "That's very kind of you, General, but I have to get back to the White House."

Back in the helicopter she fastened her seat belt, then took from her pocket a plastic container the size of a small wallet or billfold. This was known as the Biscuit. It could be opened only by breaking the plastic. Inside was a card with a series of letters and numbers: the codes for authorizing a nuclear attack. The president had to carry the Biscuit all day and keep it beside the bed all night.

Gus saw what she was doing and said: "Thank heaven the Cold War is over."

She said: "That ghastly place has reminded me that we still live on the edge."

"We just have to make sure it's never used."

And Pauline, more than anyone else in the world, had that responsibility. Some days she felt the weight on her shoulders. Today it was heavy.

She said: "If I ever come back to Munchkin Country, it will be because I have failed."

DEFCON 5

LOWEST STATE OF READINESS.

CHAPTER 1

Seen from a plane, the car would have looked like a slow beetle creeping across an endless beach, the sun glinting off its polished black armor. In fact it was doing thirty miles per hour, the maximum safe speed on a road that had unexpected potholes and cracks. No one wanted to get a flat tire in the Sahara Desert.

The road led north from N'Djamena, capital city of Chad, through the desert toward Lake Chad, the biggest oasis in the Sahara. The landscape was a long, flat vista of sand and rock with a few pale yellow dried-up bushes and a random scatter of large and small stones, everything the same shade of mid-tan, as bleak as a moonscape.

The desert was unnervingly like outer space, Tamara Levit thought, with the car as a rocket ship. If anything went wrong with her space suit she could die. The comparison was fanciful and made her smile. All the same she glanced into the back of the car, where there were two reassuringly large plastic demijohns of water, enough to keep them all alive in an emergency until help arrived, probably.

The car was American. It was designed for difficult terrain, with high clearance and low gearing. It had tinted windows, and Tamara was wearing sunglasses, but even so the light glared off the concrete road and hurt her eyes.

All four people in the car wore shades. The driver, Ali, was a local man, born and raised here in Chad. In the city he wore blue jeans and a T-shirt, but today he had on a floor-length robe called a galabiya, with a loose cotton scarf wound around his head, traditional clothing for protection from the merciless sun.

Next to Ali in the front was an American soldier, Corporal Peter Ackerman. The rifle held loosely across his knees was a US Army standard-issue short-barreled lightweight carbine. He was about twenty years old, one of those young men who seemed to overflow with chirpy friendliness. To Tamara, who was almost thirty, he seemed ridiculously young to be carrying a lethal weapon. But he had no lack of confidence—one time he had even had the cheek to ask her for a date. “I like you, Pete, but you’re much too young for me,” she had said.

Beside Tamara in the rear seat was Tabdar “Tab” Sadoul, an attaché at the European Union mission in N’Djamena. Tab’s glossy mid-brown hair was fashionably long, but otherwise he looked like an off-duty business executive, in khakis and a sky-blue button-down shirt, the sleeves rolled to show brown wrists.

She was attached to the American embassy in N’Djamena, and she wore her regular working clothes, a long-sleeved dress over trousers, with her dark hair tucked into a headscarf. It was a practical outfit that complied with tradition, and with her brown eyes and olive skin she did not even look like a foreigner. In a high-crime country such as Chad it was safer not to stand out, especially for a woman.

She was keeping an eye on the odometer. They had been on the road a couple of hours but now they were close to their destination. Tamara was tense about the meeting ahead. A lot hung on it, including her own career.

“Our cover story is a fact-finding mission,” she said. “Do you know much about the lake?”

“Enough, I think,” Tab said. “The Chari River rises in central Africa, runs eight hundred and seventy miles, and stops here. Lake Chad sustains several million people in four countries: Niger, Nigeria, Cameroon, and Chad. They’re small farmers, graziers, and fishermen. Their favorite fish is the Nile perch, which can grow to six feet long and four hundred pounds.”

Frenchmen speaking English always sounded as if they were trying to get you into bed, Tamara thought. Perhaps they always were. She said: “I guess they don’t catch many Nile perch now that the water is so shallow.”

“You’re right. And the lake used to cover ten thousand square miles, but now it’s only about five hundred. A lot of these people are on the edge of starvation.”

“What do you think of the Chinese plan?”

“A canal one thousand five hundred miles long, bringing water from the river Congo? Chad’s president is keen on it, not surprisingly. It might even happen—the Chinese do amazing things—but it won’t be cheap, and it won’t be soon.”

China’s investments in Africa were regarded, by Tamara’s bosses in Washington and Tab’s in Paris, with the same mixture of awestruck admiration and deep mistrust. Beijing spent billions, and got things done, but what were they really after?

Out of the corner of her eye Tamara saw a flash in the distance, a gleam as of sunlight on water. “Are we approaching the lake?” she asked Tab. “Or was that a mirage?”

“We must be close,” he said.

“Look out for a turning on the left,” she said to Ali, and then she repeated it in Arabic. Both Tamara and Tab were fluent in Arabic and French, the two main languages of Chad.

“Le voilà,” Ali replied in French. Here it is.

The car slowed as it approached a junction marked only by a pile of stones.

They turned off the road onto a track across gravelly sand. In places it was hard to distinguish the track from the desert around it, but Ali seemed confident. In the distance Tamara glimpsed patches of green, smudged by heat haze, presumably trees and bushes growing by the water.

Beside the road Tamara saw the skeleton of a long-dead Peugeot pickup truck, a rusting body with no wheels or windows, and soon there were other signs of human habitation: a camel tied to a bush, a mongrel dog with a rat in its mouth, and a scatter of beer cans, bald tires, and ripped polythene.

They passed a vegetable patch, plants in neat straight lines being irrigated by a man with a watering can, then they came to a village, fifty or sixty houses spread randomly, with no pattern of streets. Most of the dwellings

were traditional one-room huts, with circular mud-brick walls and tall pointed roofs of palm leaves. Ali drove at walking pace, threading the car between the houses, avoiding barefoot children and horned goats and outdoor cooking fires.

He stopped the car and said: “Nous sommes arrivés.” We have arrived.

Tamara said: “Pete, would you please put the carbine on the floor? We want to look like students of ecology.”

“Sure thing, Ms. Levit.” He put the gun by his feet, with its stock hidden under his seat.

Tab said: “This used to be a prosperous fishing village, but look how far away the water is now—a mile, at least.”

The settlement was heartbreakingly poor, the poorest place Tamara had ever seen. It bordered a long, flat beach that had presumably been underwater once. Windmills that had pumped water to the fields now stood far from the lake, derelict, their sails turning pointlessly. A herd of skinny sheep grazed a patch of scrub, watched by a little girl with a stick in her hand. Tamara could see the lake glittering in the distance. Raffia palms and moshi bushes grew on the near shore. Low islets dotted the lake. Tamara knew that the larger islands served as hideouts for the terrorist gangs who plagued the inhabitants, stealing what little they had and beating any who tried to stop them. People who were already impoverished were made absolutely destitute.

Tab said: “What are those people doing in the lake, do you know?”

There were half a dozen women standing in the shallows, scooping the surface with bowls, and Tamara knew the answer to Tab’s question. “They’re skimming edible algae from the surface. We call it spirulina but their word is *dihé*. They filter it, then dry it in the sun.”

“Have you tried it?”

She nodded. “It tastes awful but apparently it’s nutritious. You can buy it in health food shops.”

“I’ve never heard of it. It doesn’t sound like the kind of thing that appeals to the French palate.”

“You know it.” Tamara opened the door and stepped out. Away from the car’s air-conditioning, the atmosphere struck her like a burn. She pulled her